

Sermon by Rev David Thiem

Pentecost 17 – 10.30am Wesley – 11th September 2016

Theme: “The lost is found”

Reading: Luke 15: 1-10 ‘The parables of the lost sheep and coin’

Text: “In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” Vs 10

Introduction

Some time ago there was a travel article on the pubs in Oxford which commented:

‘A good pub is a ready made party, a home away from home, a club anyone can join.’

One can imagine the Jesus of Luke 15 sitting in such a pub, eating and drinking with ‘anyone’ to the chagrin of the proper and pure.

I remember in my first parish in Burra in South Australia, shortly after we became the Uniting Church, walking into the pub late on a Friday afternoon to meet some friends for a drink. There were a number of parishioners there, one of whom later said to me, ‘my whisky turned to water when I saw you, so astounded was I to see my Methodist background minister in the pub.’ I simply replied, well it’s a meeting place and it’s good to be able to gather where others are and share with them where they are comfortable.

Here in the Gospel for today, Jesus is eating with the tax collectors and the sinners, while the Pharisees and the scribes are grumbling about the company he keeps. The word translated in the Greek as ‘welcomes’, can also be translated as ‘seeks out’ – hence here Jesus is seeking out the sinners and eats with them. What a marvellous picture image that is! (well, I think it is)

Let us look at these two, seemingly simply parables, and see what we can learn from them.

The parables of the ‘lost sheep’ and the ‘lost coin’

In response to the negative mutterings of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, Jesus tells three parables, two of which are our Gospel for today. The third is also in our Lectionary but not for now – rather it comes as part of the Lenten readings leading up to Easter with the story of the lost son. These ‘lost and found’ parables have to do with, ‘who is in’ and ‘who is out’, who is lost and who is found and what does it mean to be saved by Christ. Hence the context of these parables is specifically to the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, the scribes, who thought they understood all this. Just maybe, it is for the church today as well!

Earlier in Luke, Jesus says: ‘Search, and you will find.’ (Luke 11:9)

From this we may well be tempted to read these parables as emphasizing the same point – we are saved by finding what we seek. We might imagine ourselves as the shepherd looking for the sheep or as the woman looking for the coin. We might imagine that these parables encourage our searching, so that we might find what we have lost. These parables in fact do something else. They make us the sinners, not the searchers – we are in fact the lost objects, lost not in the subjective sense of not

knowing where we are, but in the objective sense of having become the object of another's search. That is, we are lost to someone, who is, we are assured, seeking us. This throws a different perspective on these parables and we are called to re-assess these words of Jesus. We are not the seekers of what is lost, rather we are the lost being sought – think through that for a moment!

Think of that thing most precious in your life and what it would be like to lose it, whether through carelessness, intent, or theft. Something on which you place extreme value and for what reason it goes missing. You would be devastated. Not that you cannot continue with life itself, you can – but life is not the same, it is incomplete and part of the whole is missing.

God is like the shepherd who values each sheep in the flock, like the woman who accounts for every silver coin in her purse. God treasures every child of the family. When one goes missing, when there is a major upset, God goes into search mode. God's nature is love, and love looks like one who goes out tirelessly searching, because the one who is lost is so lost that he or she cannot find their way back home, for whatever reason.

Woven in with the nature of God is the nature of the one who is lost. A lost sheep that is able to bleat out in distress often will not do so, out of fear. Instead it will curl up and lie down hidden in the brush for fear of being found by the predators. It is so fearful in its seclusion that it doesn't even help in its own rescue.. The sheep is immobilized, so the shepherd must bear the full weight in searching to bring it home. It will not come by itself. Similarly, the lost coin, an inanimate object, is unable to call out or shine brightly to bring attention to itself. Its rescue is totally dependent upon the woman's diligence.

These parables remind us that the action within them lies entirely with God. God values, God searches and God finds. The sheep and the coin are entirely recipients of the love of God the shepherd, and God the woman.

Reflection

Henri Nouwen, in his book *'The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming'* writes:

'Now I wonder whether I have sufficiently realized that during all this time God has been trying to find me, to know me, and to love me. The question is not, "How am I to find God?" but rather "How am I to let myself be found by God?" The question is not "How am I to know God?" but "How am I to let myself be known by God?" And finally, the question is not "How am I to love God?" but "How am I to let myself be loved by God?"'

It is in being found by God that the rejoicing, the partying happens. The lost to God is found by God – now the rejoicing occurs.

This is a slap in the face for the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law, the scribes, who feel they have found God and are therefore righteous and condemning of others. Jesus says to them, you've got it around the wrong way – God finds you and when God finds you there is a party worth having, even in heaven or down the pub with Jesus!

Prayer

Shepherd God, who searches in the wild places, venturing into dangerous territory, receive our thanks and praise. Old woman God, who lights a lamp, sweeps and searches relentlessly, we are in awe of your great love. You search us out unceasingly until we are found by you. Those who feel unimportant or inconsequential, those who feel less worthy of your love, and those who run further from your ways, you seek harder to find. You are a God of grace, relentless in your searching and we are your grateful people found in you. Amen.